Did Johnson affect Trump or Clinton? A note on the Libertarian vote in the 2016 presidential election

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30 October 2016

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(30th of October 2016)

Abstract. It is widely suspected that the candidates of the US Libertarian Party usually take votes almost exclusively or at least predominantly from Republican Party candidates. A look at almost 200 published 3- and 4-way polls (March-October) in the 2016 US presidential election indicates that Gary Johnson's candidacy affected both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, did so moderately, and none in particular. When controlling for other factors Clinton's lead seems to have been negatively affected. This suggests that Libertarian support in 2016 to a large degree has come from voters who otherwise would have split more or less equally between Democrats and Republicans or not have voted at all.

Key words: Donald Trump; Gary Johnson; Hillary Clinton; Jill Stein; 2016 presidential election; polls.

Introduction

The 2016 presidential election has been special in that the election year has exhibited a strong undercurrent of voter dissatisfaction and that it has pitted as the major party candidates two individuals with record high negative favorability ratings. Together this should produce a climate favorable to "third party" candidacies.

This has, so far, turned out to be the case. Together Libertarian Party presidential candidate Gary Johnson and Green Party candidate Jill Stein have over the Spring, Summer and early Fall 2016 often polled vote shares totaling a combined 17-18 percent, never below 4 percent and on average ca. 10 percent This is the strongest support for "third party" candidates in a quarter of a century, and at its highest it is on par with H. Ross Perot's showing in 1992 (18.9 percent).

The Libertarian candidate has been particularly strong, at least when seen in a historical perspective. The Libertarian Party has run candidates since 1972, more often than any other modern "third party" in all 50 states (or very close), but never really being able to surpass a support of 1 percent and usually with a vote share of ca. 0.5 percent.[1] In contrast, looking at 196 3- or 4-way non-partisan polls published between 23rd of March and 26th of October 2016 (cf. Figure 1) Gary Johnson and his Vice Presidential candidate, William Weld, have polled an average of 7.8 percent and with a median share of 8.0 percent. This level of support held relatively steady over almost six months, occasionally attracting as much as 13 percent of the total vote, although with a tendency to drop in September-October (cf. Enten 2016; Sabato, Kondik, and Skelley 2016; Bump 2016b). The size of the Libertarian vote has (with a standard deviation of 2.2 percent) been marginally more stable than that of the Democrats and Republicans (2.9 percent and 2.8 percent respectively). Should Johnson receive support in that order on election day, it would on par with H. Ross Perot (1996: 8.4 percent) and surpass notable historical results such as those of John Anderson (1980: 6.6 percent), Eugene Debbs (1912: 6.0 percent; 1920: 3,4 percent), Ralph Nader (2000: 2.7 percent).

[1] The largest vote share in a presidential election was that of Ed Clark in 1980 (1.1 percent).

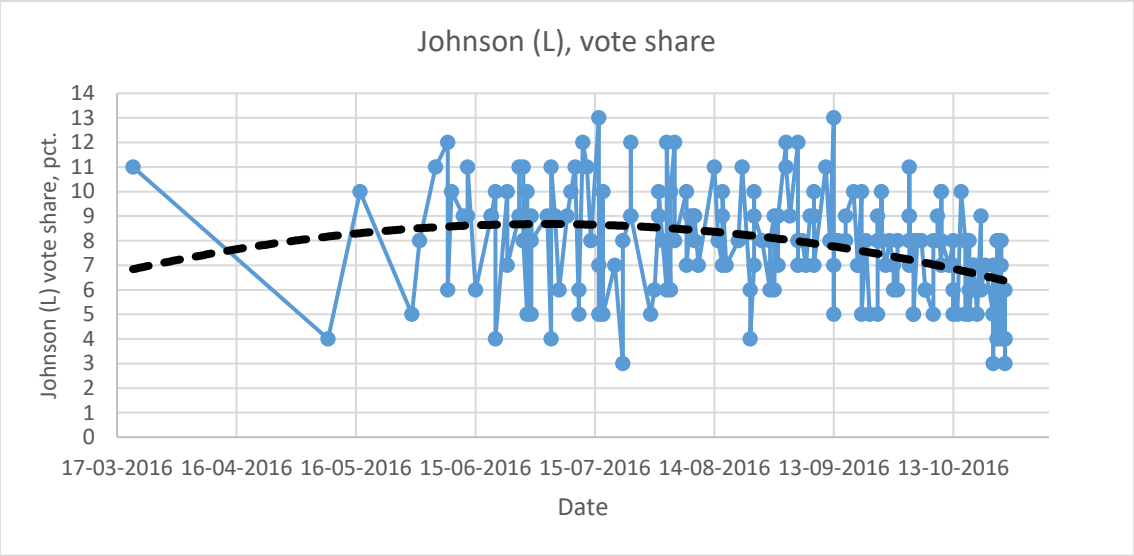

Figure 1. Johnson (L) vote share, published polls March-October 2016 (N=196).

Where do the votes come from?

A question frequently raised, both in general and in the extraordinary 2016 election, is whether Libertarian candidates will primarily take votes from the Republicans or the Democrats. It is widely assumed that it will primarily, perhaps almost entirely, be from the former.

There are obvious reasons to think so. In the case of the 2016 US presidential election the Libertarian Party picked a ticket with two former Republican governors, and the party has a long-time established overlap with the free-market wing of the Republican Party and has previously had presidential candidates with a Republican past (1988: Congressman Ron Paul; 1992: State rep. André Marrou; 2004: Congressman Bob Barr; 2012: Johnson). The party's first (and only) electoral vote came in 1972 from an unfaithful Republican (Nixon) elector, fmr. State rep. Roger MacBride, who later himself became presidential candidate for LP (1976). For years there has been a "Republican Libertarian Caucus", now renamed "Republican Liberty Caucus", inside the Republican Party, etc., etc. Some of those looking at poll averages have indeed reached the conclusion that Johnson could be seen as predominantly

taking votes from Trump and thus, at least marginally, benefitting Clinton (e.g., Volokh 2016; Levy 2016).

On the other hand, on, e.g., issues of foreign policy and civil liberties, the positions of the Libertarian Party might better appeal to "liberal" Democrats. There have also been suggestions that the Johnson/Weld campaign was consciously aiming for dissatisfied Democratic voters, presumably expecting that they had already garnered as many anti-Trump Republican voters as they could. Some have indeed suggested that Clinton has been a primary beneficiary of waning Johnson support, or that Johnson primarily has taken votes from her (DeBenedetti 2016; Sabato, Kondik, and Skelley 2016; Bump 2016b).

However, there is also the non-trivial possibility that a Libertarian might attract more or less equally from the two parties—especially in a situation where the candidates of these are more or less equally unpopular. Finally, there is the related and equally open possibility that Libertarians might draw support from voters who otherwise would not have voted at all.

There is no easy way to examine this scientifically in an entirely satisfactory wat without a comprehensive voter survey with both many individual respondents and a sufficiently large number of questions, e.g., as the American National Election Surveys and those possibly conducted by partisan campaigns. Such do not exist accessible for the 2016 election at the time of writing, and those writers who have looked at the question have mostly done so by looking at vote shares for the presidential candidates in polls with/without Johnson and then comparing average vote shares for Clinton and Trump in both sets (e.g., Blumenthal 2016; Levy 2016; Sabato, Kondik, and Skelley 2016). The problem with such an approach is that it in practice disregards the possible effects of voters staying at home if one or more candidates are not on the ballot. More often than not such analysis also does not consider whether the extent to which any differences in vote shares are statistically significant.

Another possible research strategy is that with such a relatively large number of 3- or 4-way polls on hand we should be able to conduct simple regression analysis on what associations in support levels (vote shares) are robust relative to each other, possibly controlling for other factors. So, if the Libertarian candidate (Johnson) were to take votes primarily from the Republican candidate (Trump) we should expect this hypothesis to be true:

HYPOTHESIS 1: There will be a negative correlation between Johnson-votes and Trump-votes, i.e., a larger (smaller) share for Johnson associates with a smaller (larger) share for Trump.

However, given that a "third" candidate may take votes from more than one other candidate the really interesting question is not that of vote share but lead. So if we think that Johnson primarily draws support that otherwise would have gone to Trump, we should also expect the following hypothesis to be true:

HYPOTHESIS 2: There will be a positive correlation between Johnson-votes and Clinton's lead, i.e., a larger (smaller) share for Johnson associates with a larger (smaller) difference between Clinton and Trump.

Even if we do not have individual level data, these two hypotheses are easily testable through simple binary correlation analysis. To do so we analyze 196 published polls, where Clinton, Trump and Johnson have been included; in 153 of these Green Party candidate Jill Stein has also been included. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1. Bivariate regression analysis of 3- and 4-way opinion polls, 2016 US presidential election, March-October 2016. Pearson correlation (p-values).

Comparisons	(a) All polls March-October	(b) All polls March-September	(c) All polls October
Johnson vote share / Trump vote share	-0.338*** (0.000)	-0.188** (0.028)	-0.495*** (0.000)
Johnson vote share / Clinton vote share	-0.303*** (0.000)	-0.143* (0.098)	-0.258** (0.046)
Johnson vote share / Clinton lead over Trump (%-point)	0.018 (0.799)	0.046 (0.596)	0.152 (0.246)
Johnson vote share / polling month	-0.272*** (0.000)	-0.040 (0.645)	-[a]
N	196	136	60

Notes: *: p < 0.10; **: p < 0.05; ***: p < 0.01 (2-tailed). [a] Not included since all polls of the sub-sample are from the same month.
Polls included: Non-partisan 3- or 4-way polls included by RealClearPolitics.com, HuffingtonPost.com and PollingReport.com, from 21st of March 2016 to 26th of October 2016.

Column (a) displays the correlations between Johnson's vote shares and various other variables for all 196 polls from the period considered. The analysis shows that there are statistically significant, negative associations between both Johnson's vote shares and those of Clinton and Trump. Figures 2 and 3 graphically reproduce the bivariate correlations between Johnson and the two major party candidates. The size of both sets of associations are non-trivial but with relatively low explanatory power (R^2 of 0.09 and 0.11 respectively). As such the correlation gives moderate support for our Hypothesis 1.

More importantly, and probably due to the relative weakness of the former relationships, there is no statistically significant association between Johnson's standing in the polls and the differences in the same between Clinton and Trump: The correlation is positive but very small (0.018) and statistically insignificant (p=0.799), and the explanatory power is non-existent (R^2=0.001). Figure 4 gives a graphical representation. On this basis we should reject Hypothesis 2.

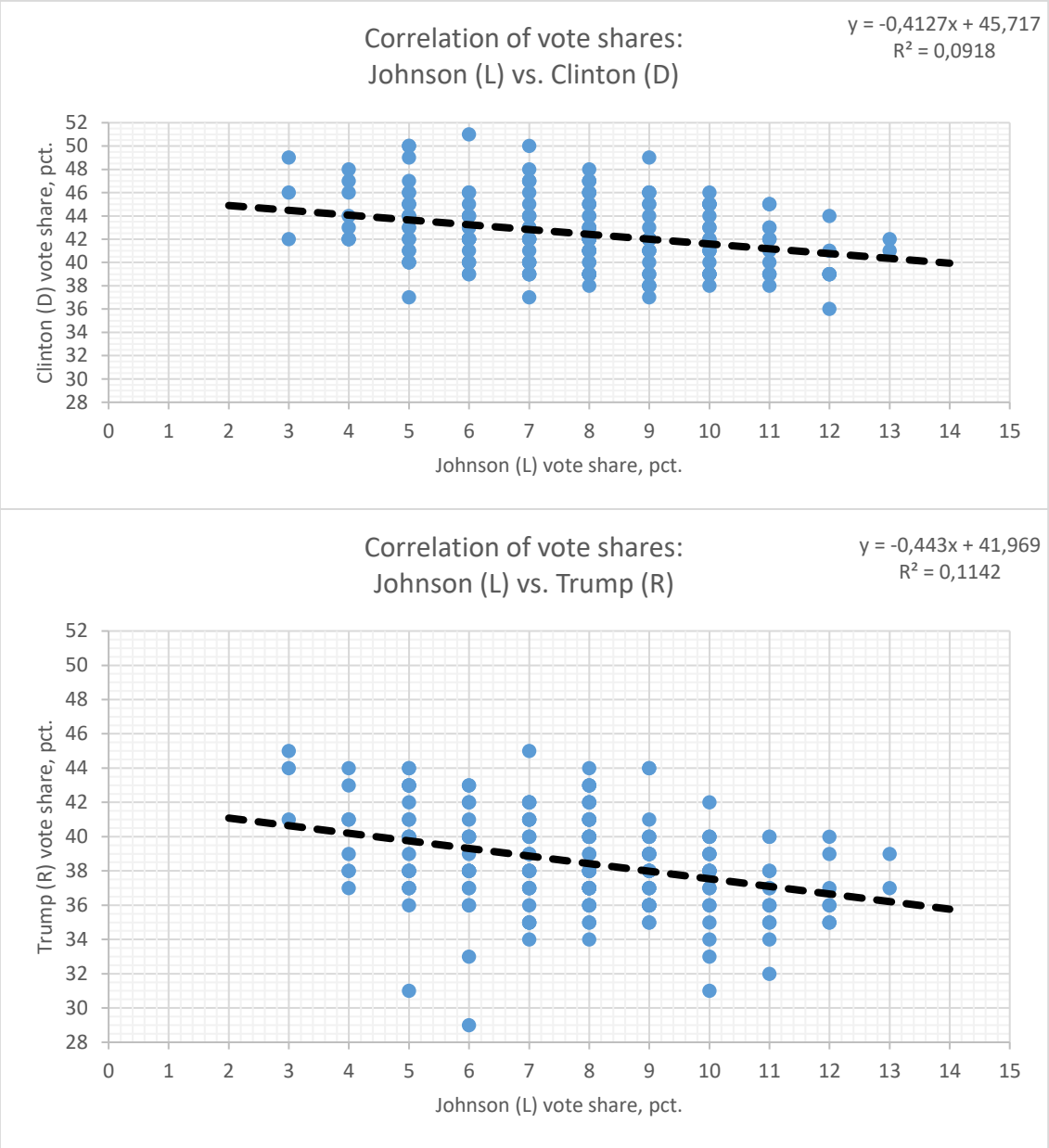

Figure 2 and Figure 3. Bivariate correlations between Johnson's vote shares and those of Clinton and Trump, published polls March-October 2016 (N=196).

However, the analysis in column (a) of Table 1 suggests that there is a negative relationship between polling date and Johnson's vote share, thus confirming the tendency of waning support for Johnson in the Fall of 2016 on display in Figure 1.

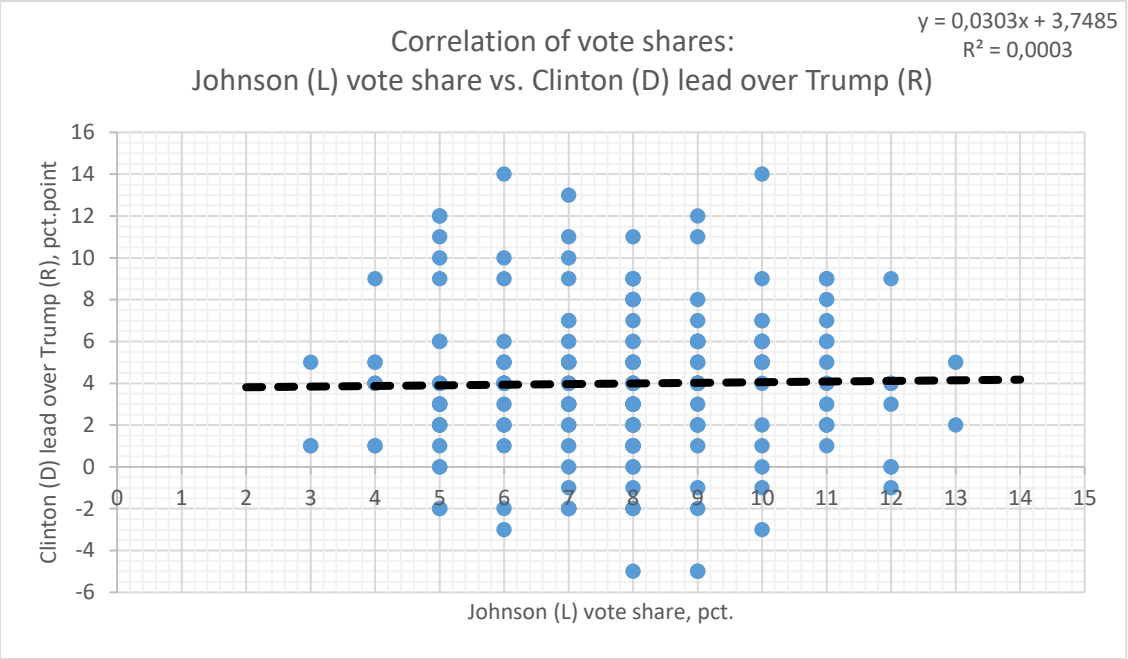

Figure 4. Correlation between vote shares of Johnson (L) and Clinton (D)'s lead over Trump (R), published polls March-October 2016 (N=196).

That "third party" candidates lose support in the Fall relative to earlier parts of the election year seems to be a well-known and predictable phenomenon (Blumenthal 2016; Bump 2016a; Bump 2016b), and there may be at least two reasons. First of all, as the campaigns heat up after September 1st and almost all focus is on the two major party candidates, "third party" candidates are hurt by the "don't waste your vote"-argument. Second, there is also a credible case that "third party" support is systematically overestimated in early polling in most recent elections, because simply adding more than two names will draw votes away from the two major party candidates (Blumenthal 2016). For these reasons we have, also in Table 1, repeated the former analysis for two subsamples of the full set of polls considered: The polls up to September 30th (column (b)) and the polls thereafter (column (c)). These correlation coefficients exhibit exactly the same patterns as in (a), although the size of the associations become more pronounced. In other words: We have moderate support for Hypothesis 1 and no support for Hypothesis 2.

Finally, we may consider whether the bivariate correlations between vote shares in reality may hide a more significant relationship, which only appears if more factors are considered together. Table 2 contains the results of an ordinary least squares multiple regression analysis, with Clinton's lead in the polls as the dependent variable. Included as independent variables are in column (a) Trump's, Stein's and Johnson's vote shares as well as the month of polling (in order to capture Johnson's waning support over time), and in (b) the same, except with Trump's vote shares replaced by Clinton's.

Table 2. Multiple regression analysis, Clinton lead in 3- and 4-way opinion polls, 2016 US presidential election, March-October 2016. Ordinary Least Squares (t-values).

	(a)	(b)
Constant	37.52***	37.07***
	(10.49)	(11.40)
Clinton vote share	-	-0.01
		(-0.18)
Trump vote share	-1.02***	-
	(-12.13)	
Stein vote share	0.12	-0.05
	(1.44)	(-0.66)
Johnson vote share	-0.31***	-0.36***
	(-2.82)	(-3.56)
Polling month	-0.90***	0.61***
	(4.99)	(3.46)
F-statistic	38.35***	11.45***
R^2 (adj.)	0.48	0.20
S.E.E.	2.55	2.40
N	196	196

Notes and polls included: See Table 1.

In model (a) of Table 2 there is, as one would expect, a strong and statistically significant negative relationship between Clinton's lead in polls and Trump's vote share in the same polls, essentially 1:1. However, here Johnson's vote share also seems to associate in a statistically significant degree with Clinton's but in a negative

direction. In other words: Larger vote shares for Johnson associates with *smaller* vote shares for Clinton (and vice versa).

Model (b) has a significantly poorer over-all fit, but here there is also a statistically significant (negative) association between Johnson's support and Clinton's lead.

Together the two models suggest—imperfect as they are as general examinations of Clinton's lead—the same as seen in the bivariate correlations: That Johnson's support levels interact more or less equally with those of Clinton and Trump. Specifically, looking at our two hypotheses we can say this: Hypothesis 1 (Johnson's vote share is negatively related to Trump's) is confirmed—i.e. the Libertarian candidate does take some votes from the Republican. However, as regards our Hypothesis 2 matters are more complex: There is no positive correlation between Johnson's vote shares and Clinton's lead—although there is a correlation, and in fact it is negative.

Discussion and conclusion

On the basis of the previous analysis it is impossible to conclude that a Johnson candidacy in any significant manner negatively affects Trump's election chances (although results at state levels of course may affect the number of electoral votes in ways not considered here). While there may have been an increased tendency for vote exchanges between Trump and Johnson since September (as suggested by column (c) in Table 1), resulting in waning support for Johnson, the over-all picture is that Johnson's standing in the polls seems to have affected Trump and Clinton more or less equally, but overall with a negative effect for Clinton's chances.

As a word of caution, it should be noted that the present analysis potentially suffers from the well-known "ecological fallacy": It may be that patterns found between variations in macro properties (vote shares) do not in fact reflect changes in at the level of the individual voters. Nonetheless, it provides a more robust analysis of the question than most commentary seen during the campaign.

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